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Russian cooperation could help SALT

President Carter, at his last press conference, sent an important signal to the Kremlin. He chose his words carefully when he categorically rejected a question implying that he might delay taking the SALT II treaty to the public and turn it into an election issue in 1980.

"No one," he said with obvious emphasis, "has ever seriously considered in my administration, to my knowledge, any slightest delay in concluding the SALT treaty for political purposes."

It was not one of those answers that hit the headlines the next day. But it reflected the president's awareness that the Russians needed to be reassured that he would not play electoral politics with SALT II.

The need arose from a remark attributed to someone close to the president who had suggested to a reporter that Mr. Carter may want to string out the SALT negotiations and turn the SALT treaty into a politically advantageous election issue in 1980. Whether this presidential aide simply hinted at the idea in the belief that it would be good political tactics and have a salutary affect on the growing domestic opposition to the treaty, or whether he was more than offering his own

personal opinion, is now hard to establish.

However, the subsequent newspaper report based on this suggestion apparently triggered some alarm bells in the Kremlin which, always suspicious of American intentions, then wanted to know whether President Carter was indeed planning to play presidential politics with the SALT treaty.

The Kremlin's concern troubled those engaged in the negotiations, for after all, unless there is absolute certainty on the part of the Kremlin that the negotiations had truly reached the last lap and that the president was determined to seek Senate ratification as soon as possible, the last concessions necessary to wrap up the treaty were likely to be delayed.

Mr. Brezhnev's own prestige was at stake since he was obviously one of those in the Politburo who was responsible for some of the crucial compromises agreed to by the Russians. Furthermore, there are indeed some in the White House who believe that it would make a lot of sense to let the signed treaty simmer until 1980 and then use it against an irresponsible Republican onslaught to dramatize SALT as the big peace issue of our time.

The Russians for these and maybe other reasons showed some hesita-

tions at the negotiating table. They not only seemed unsure about the president's own intentions, they also seemed to wonder whether a new emphasis on the need for more effective verifiability of Russian missile developments was a dilatory tactic or serious business.

For all these reasons the White House decided to make a major and convincing effort to reassure the Kremlin. First, Dr. Brzezinski, the president's national security adviser, and Harold Brown, the secretary of defense, neither of whom the Russians considered convinced supporters of the SALT II treaty, delivered emphatic speeches in support of it. Then, in addition to private assurances, President Carter made his press conference statement to set all Soviet doubts at rest.

Now in these closing stages of the negotiations, the stickiest problem is how to ensure the best possible means for verification. Almost every issue is affected by the complexities of the verification problem, whether it relates to the specifications of existing weapons systems or the modifications that are both permissible and verifiable, or to the limitations to be imposed on new-type weapons.

Verification, quite obviously, will be the central issue in the Senate ratification debate. The administration therefore is particularly anxious to present to the Senate as convincing a case as possible. It may even lead the United States to ask the Russians to cooperate in making the monitoring of Soviet missile testing easier, in view of the fact that the loss of the CIA's tracking and eavesdropping equipment that used to be positioned in central and northeastern Iran has, at least temporarily, weakened the American monitoring system.

Such measures of cooperation, however, would not be raised until after the signing of the SALT treaty, for they would involve measures bordering on delicate intelligence problems which are among the most sensitive between the two superpowers.

If the Russians are imaginative enough, they would agree to some such cooperative arrangements after the signing but before the Senate ratification debate reaches a crucial stage. They would then give SALT and its significance in Soviet-American relations.